

Zahid Mehmood Zaidy
Trend World Enterprises - Hong Kong
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Chinese New Year Red Pocket Gifts

A wonderful Monetary Gift Customs. A Simple Guide for Expats.

During the Chinese New Year Festival, lai see (利是), also known as red packets or red envelopes, are exchanged as a symbol of good luck, prosperity, and blessings. Many expats and ethnic minorities may be unfamiliar with this tradition, so the guide below explains who gives, who receives, and the proper etiquette.

Who Gives and Who Receives Lai See

Married to Unmarried:

Traditionally, only married individuals are expected to give lai see. Unmarried people are generally recipients.

Seniors to Juniors:

Elders give lai see to younger family members to wish them good health, success, and good fortune.

Employers to Staff:

Employers typically give lai see to employees. It is also customary to

give red packets to service staff such as cleaners, security guards, and building staff as a gesture of appreciation.

Married Children to Parents:

Married adults often give lai see to their parents as a sign of respect and gratitude.

Unmarried Status:

If you are single, you are generally not expected to give lai see to family members or relatives.

Key Etiquette and Rules.

Use Both Hands:

Always give and receive lai see with two hands as a sign of respect.

Even Amounts Only:

Monetary amounts should be even. Odd numbers are traditionally associated with funerals.

Avoid the Number 4:

Do not give amounts containing the number 4 (e.g., HK\$40 or HK\$400), as the pronunciation of “four” sounds similar to the word for “death” in Chinese.

Use New Banknotes:

Always use clean, crisp, and unfolded banknotes to symbolize a fresh and positive start to the new year.

Married Couples Should Give Two Packets

Married couples usually give two red packets—one from each spouse—even if one spouse is not present.

Do Not Open Immediately:

It is considered polite not to open the red packet in front of the giver.

Typical Lai See Amounts (Hong Kong Context)

General Contacts / Strangers: HK\$20–HK\$50

Service Staff (Cleaners, Security, Drivers): HK\$20

Close Family & Relatives: HK\$50–HK\$100 or more

Employer to Employee: HK\$100–HK\$1,000 or more (depending on seniority and company practice)

Note: The amount is less important than the intention and goodwill behind the gesture.

What to Say When Giving Lai See

When handing over a red packet, it is customary to offer a festive greeting such as:

Kung Hei Fat Choi (恭喜發財) – Wishing you prosperity

Sun Nin Fai Lok (新年快樂) – Happy New Year

Dai Gat Dai Lei (大吉大利) – Wishing you great luck and success

